DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 051 PC 012 763

AUTHOR Provost, Paul Jean
TITLE Masking Reality: An Indian View of Inter-Ethnic Relations.
PUB DATE 24 Apr 81
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies (9th, Las Cruces, NM, April 24, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indians: *Cultural Differences: Ethnic Discrimination: Ethnic Groups: Ethnicity: *Ethnic Relations: Foreign Countries: Mexicans: Rural Areas: *Social Discrimination: Socioeconomic Influences: *Symbolism
IDENTIFIERS Mestizos (People): *Mexico (Huasteca): *Seasonal Celebrations

ABSTRACT

Carnival, which falls within the category of events described by Edward Norbeck as rites of reversal, functions as a catharsis for modern Indian groups of northern Veracruz: it is a socially non-threatening mechanism whereby an oppressed minority identifies and deals with inter-ethnic group discrimination and oppression. Subcultures of the area are the economically and politically dominant Mestizo cattle ranchers and at least five different groups of Indian peasant farmers. The Indians of rural Mexico are discriminated against politically, economically, educationally, and socially. However, during Carnival (which combines pre-Hispanic Indian ritual with European pre-Lenten celebration) Mestizos are made ridiculous and laughable when portrayed as Mecos, masked and costumed Indian male performers who play pranks as they romp through Indian villages. The masks, which symbolically represent the ambivalent powers of the Indian universe, also represent urban Mestizo culture, showing exaggerations of valued Mestizo facial characteristics. The remainder of the disguise highlights this burlesque by accentuating physical characteristics. The most prominent feature of both male and female Meco costumes, always including Western shoes, is a combination of Western-style clothing arranged in the most outrageous fashion the performer can imagine. Carnival represents not only psychological revenge, but provides an Indian view of inter-ethnic relations. (CM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED204051

MASKING REALITY: AN INDIAN VIEW OF INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

by

Paul Jean Provost
Department of Sociology/Anthropology
Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46805

RC 012263

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ The document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Paul Jean Provost

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Read at the ninth annual meeting of the National Association of Interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies, Las Cruces, New Mexico, April 24, 1981.

I. Introduction

There are many ways to approach the topics of injustice, oppression and discrimination in human social relationships. One obvious means would be through what may be called the sociological perspective. Following this approach one would first describe the particular area of concern or injustice from the point of view of an outside observer, and then possibly advocate some form of political or social reform. Or, on the other hand, one could approach the same issue through the eyes of the victimizers or the victims themselves. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis, for example, described the culture of poverty through the eyes and words of the poor themselves. In this way one came to understand how the oppressed minority itself felt about and dealt with the various cultural aspects of poverty. He showed those who read sociological literature that the severest pains of poverty are often not those which economically comfortable thinkers imagine. For a given population, for example, being unable to afford shoes may be a problem because it means being unable to attend church rather than because of medical or physical reasons. Lewis documented in a number of publications that people on the bottom of the social ladder themselves found various ways to deal with their lower-class situation relative to the social hierarchy as a whole (Lewis 1959, 1961, 1966, 1968).

Lewis' work suggests two important rules: (1) In any inter-group or inter-ethnic situation the various social units will find means to describe their position relative to the larger social unit of which they are a part; and (2) social groups will provide a socially non-threatening way for the group to react to social situations of discrimination and oppression.

In this report I would like to describe a unique and creative way in which members of modern Indian groups of northern Veracruz deal with

discrimination and inter-ethnic relationships in the course of their day-to-day lives as peasant farmers in rural Mexico.

II. Ethnic Groups and Inter-Ethnic Group Relationships in the Huasteca Region of Northern Veracruz

The Huasteca is the name applied to the vast area of northeastern Mexico between the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range and the Gulf of Mexico. It spreads over sections of six Mexican states: Hidalgo, Puebla, Gueretaro, San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas and Veracruz. Geographically the Huasteca represents the northernmost extent of the tropical jungle that reaches up the eastern coast of Mexico from the Yucatan peninsula. For the most part the land is a rough, undulating, or rolling plain made up of the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Ecologically the area is classified as a tropical forest, and has the rich flora and fauna associated with such a geographical zone.

Culturally, the Huasteca has long had a reputation for being a remote, rugged, and isolated area. This reputation is well deserved: even today, the entire southern half of the Huasteca has only one dirt road that penetrates the region. Most travel, therefore, must be done either on horseback or by foot, especially in the rainy season when the road becomes an impassible quagmire of mud.

Demographically the Huasteca is a multi-ethnic area. The 1970 Mexican national census reveals that the Huasteca has a total population of approximately 607,000. The census further breaks this total into two groups based upon linguistic ability. The first group, labelled Indians, is composed of 160,000 speakers (monolingual and/or bilingual) of indigenous languages. The second group, called Mestizos, consists of 447,000 monolingual speakers of Spanish. By further breaking down the statistics on Indians, we learn that

there are five different Indian groups inhabiting the area. These are the Huastec (26,496), the Nahua (112,007), the Otomi (11,046), the Tepehua (5,267) and the Totonac (5,079).

However, for our purposes the combined population of the area can be roughly divided into two fundamentally separate but nonetheless highly interrelated and interwoven sociocultural spheres or subcultures. For purposes of presentation, I shall call these, first, the Indian World or subculture, which is basically a horticultural world; and second, the Mestizo world or subculture, which is basically a cattle ranching world.

Very briefly, this situation is the result of historical factors. That is, subsequent to the Spanish Conquest of the area (and for that matter most of Mexico), the land was parcelled out to the victorious Conquistadores in large estates called encomiendas. These were essentially analogous to medieval fiefs, and therefore the land and its inhabitants were considered the personal property of the owner. This situation existed up until the long and violent Mexican Revolution of 1910-1921. After this came an extensive nation-wide agrarian reform, the fundamental aim of which was to redistribute the vast landed estates that had been traditionally monopolized by the wealthy landlord descendants of the Conquistadores, or the so called Hacendados. These estates were to be divided and redistributed to the former peones, or peasant Indian farmers (Simpson 1937, 5, 56-57).

The redistribution was done in a variety of ways, but in the main by the governmental creation of the ejido system. That is, land was returned to individual agrarian communities which would own the land communally and would be treated by the government as an incorporated entity. However, by way of compensation, the Agrarian Reform Laws allowed the old Hacendados to personally select and maintain parts of their previous estates as private property holdings.

The overall result of this today is that the large majority of land in the Huasteca is divided between Indian communal ejidos and large, privately owned ranches usually given over to profitable cattle-raising. Furthermore, it should be noted that since the old Hacendados themselves were allowed to select the parts of their previous estates that they were to retain, they tended to choose the most fertile and rich areas (Whettan 1948: 183-184). The upshot is that today the best lands generally are in the hands of the wealthy Mestizo cattle ranchers while the Indian ejidos tend to be located on less desirable lands.

From this brief sketch we can see the historical roots of the contemporary split between two general subcultures. The first includes the inheritors of the old upper class, and today consists of the economically and politically dominant Mestizo cattle ranchers and their contingent staffs, oriented toward ranching, cattle, and town life in the Cabeceras or county seats. The second subculture is made up of the various Indian peasant farmers, oriented toward their traditional life styles revolving around farming, corn, and their villages.

Of course within each of these socio-cultural spheres exist recognized cultural differences. For example, while a Mestizo will class all Indians in one category when he has occasion to oppose the Mestizo world to that of the Indian, he will also recognize that an Otomi is not linguistically or culturally the same as a Tepehua or Nahua. Correspondingly, an Otomi will consider himself as being likewise distinct from the other Indian groups. Thus, while from one point of view it is helpful to see the area as being divided into Indian-Mestizo spheres, it must not be forgotten that in reality the region is culturally much more complex and is made up of at least five major different Indian groups: the Huastec, the Nahua, the Otomi, the Tepehua, and the Totonac.

Witnessing the social relations between these two worlds, an outside observer would have no trouble citing instances of injustice, discrimination, and oppression. From the days of Cortes until present times, Indians in Mexico have occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder of Mexico. Physical, social, and political cruelties fill the history of Indian-Mestizo relationships A statement universally believed in past centuries and still unfortunately common in contemporary Mestizo Mexico is that Indians are "gentle sin razon"--retarded people having perhaps the intelligence of farm animals.

The Mestizos of the ranching world look down on the traditional peasant farmers as much for historical reasons as because of the frequent disputes over land that result from the conflict of their two different lifestyles. Indians rarely wander into the local towns, the province of the local ranchers, cowboys, store owners, and soldiers. If they were to do so, they would most likely face verbal and perhaps physical abuse from local Mestizos.

Indian life and culture are felt to be inferior or backward. Indigenous languages are felt to be underdeveloped, inferior, or incomplete languages, not worth the effort of knowing. Traditional Indian clothing is laughed at or seen as indicating primitiveness. Indians are felt to be stupid and incapable of learning proper Spanish, and village life in general is perceived as being very backward. Such ideas and statements are not limited to the streets of the Mestizo towns, for by law each Indian village must maintain at its own expense a Federal school. These schools are staffed by Mestizo instructors who daily convey the Mestizo world view of the Indian subculture to the young Indian students.

Perhaps taking a more anthropological approach to actually describing Indian subculture, an outside observer would note that basically it is a self-sufficient world based upon an essentially horticultural economy. From the sociological point of view, the Indian world can be generally characterized

as falling near the folk end of the folk-urban continuum. That is, Indian groups tend to live in remote areas and follow life styles that allow them to maintain a high degree of cultural and ethnic identity as Indians.

This apartness results primarily from economic factors. The Indian economy is self-sufficient. What the Indians don't gather from the flora and fauna of the verdant jungle, they grow. Maize, black beans, squash, melons, sugar cane, tobacco, tomatoes, onions, corriander and chili peppers form the primary crops. Until relatively recently, local cotton production sufficed for traditional Indian clothing.

Because of the Indian stress on self-sufficiency, all men are first and foremost farmers. Each is allocated enough land from village communal holdings to support his own family. This land is considered his as long as he continues to farm it. Some men take up various secondary occupations such as being a carpenter, musician, herbalist, or religious specialist. These part-time occupations satisfy vital community needs. Indian women are responsible primarily for running the household and caring for the children. Secondary occupations consist of being potters, bone setters, midwives, or religious specialists. Beyond this, the traditional Indian lifestyle consists essentially in a daily round of activities that alternate typical existential problems with religious and ritual celebrations.

III. Social Reality and Rites of Reversal

For our purposes, one of the most interesting of the Indian ritual celebrations that occur throughout the year is Carnival. In urban Mestizo centers, Carnival is a secular celebration dominated by parades, flowering floats, and dancing in the streets. But in rural Indian communities, Carnival takes on a different character. In rural Indian Mexico, the celebration represents a well-known example of cultural syncretism with a similar pre-Hispanic ritual falling at the same time of the year. Thus, in contrast

to the urban Mestizo communities, "Among the Indian communities Carnival is much more individually and interestingly celebrated with a mixture of the profane and the religious, of ritual and diversion" (Reynoso 1980:41).

In pre-Hispanic times, ritually dressed, masked dancers played a central role in the religious ceremonies and rites of almost all Mesoamerican Indian groups. In rural Mexico, numerous survivors of this ancient practice can be found. Carnival is one such example. Throughout the Huasteca, Carnival is anticipated and enjoyed as a time of high excitement and great fun. During Carnival, men do not work the fields, nor do children attend school. The women, too, reduce their work load, although less so because they have the responsibility of preparing the special holiday food that is typically served. In fact, discussion of the special foods that will be made and of the bands that will play for the nightly dances, as well as of possible new articles of clothing that may be purchased and of how many visitors one will receive and so on and so forth, are constant subjects of conversation.

The most dominant topic of conversation, however, is the Mecos and their impending activities. The Mecos are, in fact, the central feature of the entire Carnival ritual. They are a group of masked and costumed performers who romp through Indian villages during Carnival, wreaking havoc wherever they go. They are not considered so much diabolical as they are pranksters. Generally, in the native Indian worldview, the Mecos are associated with the Afterlife and the ambivalent powers of the universe. They have great license, and generally wear strange masks and outlandish combinations of clothes. In actuality, the Mecos are all males from the local village, but their identities are supposed to be a well-kept secret; and of course their various disguises and masks contribute to the anonymity that surrounds them. Indeed the costumes of the Mecos are particularly interesting. While each costume is the

result of the ingenuity of the individual performer, tradition dictates the basic cultural themes of each disguise.

In times past the masks were made exclusively of wood and were painted in disguise motifs including animals, birds, and types of spirits. Today the disguises are much more limited, but by far the most predominant are various papier mache masks representing urban Mestizo culture. That is, the masks of the male figures have very light European, pink skin, enormous noses, and tremendous moustaches. The female masks are similarly based on the European-looking face, with flamboyant make-up and exaggerated features. The remainder of the disguise tries to highlight this burlesque by continuing to accentuate the ridiculous. If a particular Meco is disguised, say, as a women, the costume will exaggerate the female features to the absurd.

The most prominent characteristic of both male and female Meco costumes, however, is the absurd combinations of Western-style clothes arranged in the most innovatively outrageous fashion the individual performers can imagine. One last item completes the disguise--western shoes. In rural Mexico, Indians almost exclusively wear sandals; indeed, the bare foot and Huarachi sandal are the very symbols of Indian Mexico. Thus the fact that all Mecos try to obtain and wear Western shoes may provide us with a clue to the real nature of the Mecos and even Carnival itself.

IV. Conclusion and Analysis

As Victor Turner has noted in The Forest of Symbols, most symbols have at least a multiple variant of interpretations, both from the point of view of the actor and from the point of view of the outside observer (Turner 1967:20). This is certainly true of the main symbol of Carnival, the Mecos. For while the Mecos may symbolically represent the ambivalent powers of the Indian universe, they are also meant to imitate urban Mestizo culture. That

is, while the costumes of the Mecos vary greatly, the predominant motif selected for diguise is the clothing and masks of Mestizo culture. The exaggerated features are all those characteristics that Indians recognize as Mestizo: light skin, Western clothes, shoes, etc. All these items, it may be added, are held by the local Mestizo world to be the epitome of refinement, style and civilization.

As Louisa Reynoso has written, " . . . Masks are more than sculptures; they are symbols of beliefs about gods and men, good and evil, danger and well-being, which offer a key to the inner life of a people" (Reynoso 1980:37). Giving the Mecos the caricaturized form of Mestizos and then laughing at their ridiculous antics certainly represents a reversal of the world that pertains for Indians as a daily reality for the rest of the year. Social theorists like Claude Levi-Strauss (1958) feel that societies take abstract thoughts that may be hard to describe and embed them in the symbolism of their culture. Thus, symbolized in rituals that mask reality we may find truth.

Truly the Indians of rural Mexico are at the absolute bottom of the social structure of the urban Mestizo world. They are the perpetually weak and dispossessed. Every day, their way of life is assaulted as inferior, backward, and deprived by local Mestizo culture which controls the outside political, economic and social world. For the Mestizo, Indians and their lifestyle are the objects of jokes and verbal abuse. The school system itself presents Indian children with a negative image of themselves and their culture on every school day. But during Carnival the entire situation is reversed, and Mestizos in the guise of Mecos are, for a change, ridiculous and laughable. So, if masks are a key to inner lives and thoughts, Carnival represents not only psychological revenge but also an Indian view of inter-ethnic relations.

In other contexts, Edward Norbeck has labeled such ritual situations as rates of reversal (Norbeck 1971b:494-495). Activities which are generally subsumed under the concept of rites of reversal include all those in which

> . . . the social hierarchy is inverted, customary rules of moral behavior are suspended, and other ordinary behavior, such as the direction of walking and dancing, is done backward. Commoners may insult kings, women may deride men, and all kinds of resentments may be expressed with impunity. Obscenity, lewdness, sexual license, theft and assault or mock assault may all be permissible. Mimicry, drama, wit, humor, song, pageantry, alcoholic drunkenness, and other forms of induced euphoric transcendence may all be incorporated in the rites (Norbeck 1971a:51).

Rites of reversal, in short, can be defined as institutionalized calendrical occasions during which the typical social order of society is inverted, turned upside down and inside out, and the ordinary rules of behavior which characterize normal or conventional routine or existence are suspended in favor of those that actually reverse or flout generally acceptable norms and rules. This may be true either for all the members of a society or merely for certain subgroups of individuals within it.

Max Gluckman, the noted British sociologist, feels that rites of reversal, which he prefers to call rituals of rebellion, perform an integrative or cohesive function for society through the catharsis that attaches to the institutionalized, open, and symbolic acting out of certain behavioral relationships that give rise to stress, both interpersonal and intergroup, and which, if not attended to, may cause actual division, schism or uncontrolled conflict to arise within the social system. Thus, rites of rebellion actually support and maintain the social order through the regulation of conflict that arises from inherently weak or stressful social situations and relationships within a particular social system. Furthermore, according to Gluckman, these rites also serve to emphasize the correctness of the normal, conventional social order by reverse example (Gluckman 1956:115).

Carnival in the Huasteca clearly falls within the category of events described by Norbeck and Gluckman as a rite of reversal. In this light, its significance comes not from the fact that it is an historical survivor of pre-Hispanic times, but from the fact that it functions as a catharsis and perhaps integrative mechanism operating on the Indian-Mestizo ethnic boundary. It provides us not only with an Indian view of inter-ethnic relations, but also a socially non-threatening mechanism whereby an oppressed minority identifies and deals with inter-ethnic group discrimination and oppression.

Bibliography

Gluckman, Max
1956 Custom and Conflict in Africa. Oxford: Blackwell.

Levi-Strauss, Claude
1958 Anthropologie Structurale. Paris: Plon.

Lewis, Oscar
1959 Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty. New York: New American Library.

_____
1961 The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family. New York: Random House.

_____
1966 La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty--San Juan and New York. New York: Random House.

_____
1968 The Culture of Poverty, in Poverty in America. Ferman, Kornbluh and Haber (editors). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Norbeck, Edward
1971a Man at Play, in Natural History (December), vol. 80, no. 10, pp. 48-53.

_____
1971b Rituals of Reversal, in Anthropology Today. California: Del Mar, pp. 494-495.

Reynoso, Louisa
1980 Mexico Through Masks, in Americas (February), vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 37-44.

Simpson, Eyler
1937 The Ejido: Mexico's Way Out. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Turner, Victor
1967 The Forest of Symbols. Ithaca: Cornell Press.

Whettan, Nathan
1948 Rural Mexico. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.